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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002201

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM: KELLER POLL SAYS "NO"  
VOTE GAINING GROUND

REF: CARACAS 02162

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Emboffs met November 16 with pollster Alfredo Keller of Keller and Associates to discuss the December 2 referendum on President Chavez' sweeping constitutional changes. Keller said that based on his current polls the "No" vote appears to be gaining support among Chavistas despite Chavez' efforts to frame the referendum as a plebiscite on his presidency. He outlined four possible scenarios that could develop in the weeks leading up to the December 2 vote. Keller's data appears to indicate that support in favor of the reform package might be more modest than thought. His assessment, however, may underestimate the BRV's electoral machine's repeatedly demonstrated ability to mobilize Chavistas to vote. END SUMMARY.

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Keller: "No" Vote Gaining Support  
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¶2. (C) PolCouns and Poloff met November 16 with Alfredo Keller, director of the local polling firm Keller and Associates, to discuss his firm's yet to be released data on the December 2 referendum. Keller told us that the "No" vote against President Chavez' constitutional reform package is gaining support among Chavista sectors. Keller said there are two reasons why the "No" vote will likely continue to appeal to these sectors as the campaign continues. First, he claimed Chavez' popularity has slipped to 49 percent, the first time the Venezuelan president's ratings have dropped below the 50 percent mark in years. Second, Keller asserted that some voters do not believe Chavez when he says that the purpose of the reform is to transfer more power to "the people." Instead, informed voters tend to see the reform process as a power grab. Keller asserted that given the lukewarm public response to the reform package, this is the first time in four years that Chavez has the potential to lose at the polls.

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How will Chavistas vote?  
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¶3. (C) Keller told us that Chavistas are torn on the referendum issue. On the one hand, many approve of Chavez' on-the-job performance. On the other, well-informed Chavista

voters overwhelmingly disagree with the proposed changes. Keller asserted that Chavez understands this dichotomy and as a result has attempted to frame the referendum as a plebiscite on his presidency. Even under these circumstances, however, Keller predicts that many hard-line Chavistas will vote against the referendum. Curiously, Keller's raw polling data indicates that it has been easier to convince hard-line Chavistas to vote against the referendum than to convince opposition abstentionists to vote.

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Possible Scenarios  
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14. (C) Keller outlined four possible scenarios that could play out in the weeks prior to the December 2 vote.

-- Chavez allows the referendum to take place December 2. According to Keller, Chavez' "arrogance" and belief that his followers will vote "Yes" are the motivating factors behind his decision to proceed with the referendum. Under this scenario, his polling figures indicate that the "Yes" vote will likely lose.

-- The BRV will commit fraud at the polls. Chavez is aware that the reform package does not have enough popular backing to pass on its own. As such is the case, he will need to manipulate poll figures in order to produce the results he desires. This is a plausible scenario, he argued, because Chavez controls all the BRV dependencies tasked with validating the results, such as the National Electoral Council (CNE), the National Assembly, and the Supreme Court.

-- Chavez will postpone the referendum. He said this scenario is unlikely because the reform package has become less popular over time, especially among Chavistas. As a

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comparison, he cited the 2003 recall referendum when Chavez would have lost the recall if he had not successfully delayed it by almost a year. Data from Keller's focus groups indicates that the more informed Chavistas are about the proposed reforms, the less likely they are to vote in favor of it.

-- Chavista factions will foment violence. This scenario is possible if Chavez wanted to postpone the referendum in the name of re-establishing order.

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Comment  
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15. (C) Keller's poll confirms the trend that the "Yes" vote in favor of Chavez' proposed changes is more modest than thought, and that the "No" vote is steadily increasing in popularity. Keller's assessment of the possible referendum scenarios is interesting, but fails to adequately consider two important variables: the effectiveness of the BRV's electoral machine and the voting tendencies of uninformed voters. First, Keller's polling data probably underestimates the resources and logistical capacity of Chavez' electoral machine to turn-out the base. It has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to deliver voters to the polls on election day. Second, Keller gives a lot of credit to "informed" Chavistas voters without accounting for the large numbers of uninformed or apathetic voters. Other polling firms, such as Datanalisis, indicate that uninformed or undecided Chavistas are likely to vote in favor of the reforms.

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